

POSSIBILITIES FOR ENROLLING CHILDREN IN PRESCHOOL INSTITUTIONS AND EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS FROM THE PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Due to numerous scientific evidences about the importance and benefits of including children in early learning programs, we conducted a study on a sample of 334 parents of children who in 2024 attended a preparatory program in the year before starting school with the aim of investigating their views on the possibility of including children in the aforementioned programs. Parents' attitudes were analyzed in relation to their sociodemographic characteristics. The results of the research show that the number of children in the family, the order of birth of the child, the place of residence of the family, and the level of education of the parents are important determinants when forming the attitude about the acceptable cost of the child's stay in the institution, while the order of birth of the child is an important determinant of the attitude of the parents about the type of program of early learning in which they would enroll their children. The place of residence of the family proved to be an important determinant when it comes to the reason why the child did not attend preschool institutions earlier.

This research has important implications for educational policymakers and practitioners because the Republic of Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina) is a country in transition in the Western Balkans.

Keywords: Preschool children, Parents attitudes, Early learning programs.

1. Introduction

The literature highlights the importance of the economic profitability of investing in early childhood development and education as human capital (Attanasio et al., 2021; Duncan et al., 2022; Morgan, 2019; Powell et al., 2019; Wei & Ye, 2021). Research shows that the most important benefits of including preschool children in early learning programs are the positive long-term effects that children from poor families show in later life and schooling, in terms of academic skills, behavior, and emotional maturity (Alarcón & de Ordinola, 2021; Ansari et al., 2019; Bakken et al., 2017; Nold et al., 2021). Research in South Africa shows that improving the quality of preschool programs leads to more children who are prepared for school, but also to the appearance of poverty reduction in the community (Venter, 2022).

Besides the above, the following stand out as advantages: preparation for school, educational work with children of working parents, and socialization (Küçükturan & Altun, 2017). Recent research shows that parents who enroll their children in early learning programs before starting school are able to recognize the benefits of these programs, regardless of socio-demographic characteristics (Травар & Гаврић, 2025).

Despite the mentioned advantages, studies show that there are certain obstacles in the world for enrolling preschool children in early learning programs, such as inaccessibility and physical distance of institutions, feelings of exclusion due to socio-cultural differences, unfavorable experiences or information about preschool institutions, insufficient number of places in preschool institutions, concern for the child's health, underestimation of the importance of preschool upbringing and education, etc. (Janiš & Kolaříková, 2015). The authors (Küçükturan & Altun, 2017) identified the following obstacles: the financial situation of the family, the perception of the child as too young to be enrolled in learning programs, concern about the situation in preschool institutions, transporting the child to the institution, etc. The authors of this study state that one of the reasons is insufficient knowledge of parents in this area, which implies the need for additional promotion of preschool education and public awareness of its importance and benefits for children's development and learning (ibidem, 2017). In other researchers, it was also established that the reasons are of a material nature: e.g. fees and travel costs were important barriers for families to enroll children in early learning programs (Beatson et al. 2022).

Institutional preschool upbringing and education in the Republic of Srpska, as an integral part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, is implemented in the form of various early learning programs: programs for children with typical development, then for children with special educational needs, for potentially gifted and talented children, and for children with developmental disabilities. Besides the above forms, there is also a special free program for children in the year before entering school, which is implemented for a period of three months and is intended for children who, for any reason, do not attend preschool institutions (Министарство просвјете и културе

Републике Српске, 2022а). According to the duration of the early learning program, preschool education in the Republic of Srpska is provided through two types of programs: 1. full-day program — up to twelve hours per day; 2) half-day program — up to six hours per day (Министарство просвјете и културе Републике Српске, 2022б). According to the law and valid regulations, preschool institutions can be established in the public and private sectors by the Republic, local self-government units, religious communities, or other physical and legal entities.

Statistical indicators on the situation in institutional preschool upbringing and education in the Republic of Srpska show a tendency of growth and progress from year to year, and the current Strategy for the Development of Preschool, Primary, and Secondary Education in the Republic of Srpska for the period 2022-2030 (Министарство просвјете и културе, 2021) lists measures for further improving the situation in this area. Judging by the statistical data on the situation in preschool upbringing and education in the Republic of Srpska in the working year 2023/2024, the number of children attending preschool institutions was 16,807, while the number of preschool institutions was 228, of which 121 were state-owned and 107 were private institutions (Републички завод за статистику Републике Српске, 2023/2024а; Републички завод за статистику Републике Српске, 2023/2024б). Compared to the official data on including preschool children in institutional preschool upbringing and education in Europe (European Commission, 2025), this number is much smaller, although it shows a tendency to increase from year to year.

The conclusions of many studies testify to the fact that functional cooperation between the family and preschool institutions is necessary (Connelly et al., 2024; Harkness et al., 2020; Ngadni & Shuang, 2024).

2. Method

Given that parents and preschool institutions are equally important and responsible for children's development and learning at preschool age (Spasojevic et al., 2017), the aim of the research is to establish parents' attitudes about the possibilities for enrolling children in preschool institutions and early learning programs. basic task of the research is to examine the relationship between socio-demographic characteristics of parents and their views on the possibilities of enrolling children in preschool institutions and early learning programs.

The independent variables in the study are the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, namely the gender of the parents, the number of children in the family, the birth order of the child (attending the preparatory program) in the family, the place of residence of the family, the level of education of the parents, and information on whether the child attended a preschool institution in the year before entering school before starting the preparatory program. The dependent variable in the study was the parents' attitudes about the reason why the child did not previously attend a preschool institution, the type of early learning program in which they would enroll their child and the acceptable cost of the child's stay in a preschool institution.

In the research, we started from the following assumption: socio-demographic characteristics (gender of parents, number of children in the family, birth order of the child in the family, place of residence of the family, and level of education of the parents) are statistically significant determinants of parents' attitudes about the possibilities of enrolling children in preschool institutions and early learning programs.

The sample in the research consisted of 334 parents of children who in 2024 attended a preparatory program in the year before starting school in the Republic of Srpska. Precise data on the structure of the sample, according to various socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Structure of respondents according to socio-demographic characteristics

| Variable | f | % |
|-------------------------------------|-----|-------|
| 1. Gender of parents | | |
| Male | 35 | 10.5 |
| Female | 299 | 89.5 |
| TOTAL | 334 | 100.0 |
| 2. Number of children in the family | | |
| One | 40 | 12.0 |
| Two | 164 | 49.1 |
| Three | 93 | 27.8 |
| Four | 30 | 9.0 |
| Five | 6 | 1.8 |

| | | |
|---|-----|-------|
| Six | 1 | |
| TOTAL | 334 | 100.0 |
| 3. Birth order in the family (of the child attending the preparatory program) | | |
| First | 143 | 42.8 |
| Second | 133 | 39.8 |
| Third | 39 | 11.7 |
| Fourth | 16 | 4.8 |
| Fifth | 3 | .9 |
| TOTAL | 334 | 100.0 |
| 4. Family's place of residence | | |
| City | 68 | 20.4 |
| Suburb | 77 | 23.1 |
| Village | 189 | 56.6 |
| TOTAL | 334 | 100.0 |
| 5. Parents' education level | | |
| Elementary school | 22 | 6.6 |
| High school | 218 | 65.3 |
| College | 15 | 4.5 |
| University | 69 | 20.7 |
| Master`s degree | 9 | 2.7 |
| Doctoral degree | 1 | .3 |
| TOTAL | 334 | 100.0 |
| 5. Previous attendance at a preschool institution | | |
| Yes | 77 | 23.1 |
| No | 257 | 76.9 |
| TOTAL | 334 | 100.0 |

The survey questionnaire for parents included a section on socio-demographic data i 5 closed-ended questions to which the respondents were offered answers. The validity of the instrument was verified using the theoretical consistency method, whereby the researchers used official documents, scientific monographs, and scientific papers as a criterion for the content validity of the instrument.

In 2024, the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Republic Pedagogical Institute of the Republic of Srpska granted consent to conduct the research on a sample of parents whose children attended a preparatory program in the year before entering school. After that, school principals and teachers who implement the preparatory program in the year before entering school were contacted, the purpose of the research was explained to them, and the instructions for the respondents in the research were explained in detail. The respondents were also initially informed of the purpose of the research, and their participation was on a voluntary basis.

The research was conducted in 2024 in all regions of Republic of Srpska in accordance with ethical standards. Statistical data processing included the following procedures: testing the normality of data distribution (Kolmogorov-Smirnov test), calculation of basic descriptive indicators (frequencies, percentages, arithmetic mean, standard deviation, standard error), non-parametric techniques (Mann-Whitney U test and Kruskal-Volis test).

3. Findings

The basic descriptive indicators and the distribution of respondents' answers to the questions asked are presented. In order to assess which statistical techniques should be used in further data processing, we used the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test.

Table 2

Testing the Normality of Data Distribution (Kolmogorov-Smirnov)

| | Kolmogorov-Smirnov | Statistic | df | p |
|--|---------------------------|------------------|-----------|----------|
| Reason why the child has not previously attended a preschool institution | | .31 | 25 | .00 |
| Type of early learning program you would enroll your child in | | .32 | 33 | .00 |
| Acceptable cost for the child's stay in a preschool institution | | .32 | 33 | .00 |

Judging by the presented values, which are significant at the level of statistical significance $p < 0.05$, we can conclude that the data significantly differ from the normal distribution, and therefore, in further analysis, it is justified to use the non-parametric techniques Mann-Whitney U test and Kruskal-Volis test to test the first hypothesis (Table 2).

Given that 257 (76.9%) of the respondents stated that their child had never attended a preschool institution before enrolling in the preparatory program in the year before entering school, that is, had not been enrolled in early learning programs, we were interested in what the main reason for this was.

Table 3

Parents' Attitudes About the Reason Why Their Child Did Not Previously Attend a Preschool Institution (Descriptive Statistics)

| Reason why the child did not previously attend a preschool institution | f | % |
|--|-----|-------|
| Cost of the child's stay in a preschool institution | 25 | 9.73 |
| Distance from the family home/ preschool availability | 49 | 19.07 |
| Family members (father, mother, grandmother, grandfather, etc.) took care of the child | 166 | 64.59 |
| Child's health condition (weak immunity, frequent illnesses) | 5 | 1.95 |
| Shortage of available preschool places | 10 | 3.89 |
| Bad experience with a previous child who attended a preschool institution | 2 | 0.78 |
| Total | 257 | 100.0 |

The data presented in Table 3 show that the leading reasons among parents whose children did not previously attend preschool institutions were childcare in the family and the inaccessibility or distance of the preschool institution. The cost of attending preschool was only in third place.

Table 4

Parents' Attitudes About the Type of Early Learning Program They Would Enroll Their Child in (Descriptive Statistics)

| Type of early learning program you would enroll your child in | f | % |
|---|-----|-------|
| Full-day stay (up to 12 hours per day) | 31 | 12.06 |
| Half-day stay (up to 6 hours per day) | 133 | 51.75 |
| I have not considered enrolling my child in a preschool institution | 93 | 36.18 |
| Total | 257 | 100.0 |

Half of the respondents whose children did not previously attend preschool institutions (Table 4) considered enrolling their child in half-day care (up to 6 hours per day), which is encouraging, but what is also indicative is the number of respondents who did not consider enrolling their child in any early learning program offered by preschool institutions at all. The smallest number of parents considered enrolling their child in full-day care (up to 12 hours per day) in preschool institutions.

Table 5

Parents' Attitudes About the Acceptable Cost of the Child's Stay in a Preschool Institution (Descriptive Statistics)

| Acceptable cost for a child's stay in a preschool institution | f | % |
|---|-----|------|
| up to 100 convertible marks (50 Euros) | 187 | 56.0 |
| from 100 to 200 convertible marks (from 50 to 100 Euros) | 126 | 3.7 |
| from 200 to 300 convertible marks (from 100 to 150 Euros) | 15 | 4.5 |
| over 300 convertible marks (over 150 Euros) | | |
| none of the offered | | |
| Total | 1 | .3 |

5
334 1.5
100.0

Table 5 shows the distribution of respondents' answers to the question, "What would be the cost of a child's stay in a preschool institution that would be acceptable to your family's budget?" which was stated by all respondents regardless of whether their child had previously attended a preschool institution or not. The result obtained is indicative that the lowest offered price, up to 100 convertible marks, would be acceptable to half of the respondents and their families' budgets. However, if we look at this result from the aspect of the willingness of parents whose children have never attended preschool institutions before to enroll their children in a half-day stay (up to six hours a day), that is, a shorter early learning program offered by preschool institutions, we believe it is understandable that they are willing to allocate a smaller amount of money for this program.

Table 6

Parents` Gender and Attitudes Towards the Possibilities of Enrolling Children in Preschool Institutions and Early Learning Programs (Ranks)

| Variable | Parents` gender | N | Mean Rank | Sum of Ranks |
|--|-----------------|-----|-----------|--------------|
| reason why the child has not previously attended a preschool institutions Total | Male | 30 | 139.37 | 4181.00 |
| | Female | 227 | 127.63 | 28972.00 |
| | | 257 | | |
| type of early learning program in which they would enroll their child Total | Male | 35 | 161.86 | 5665.00 |
| | Female | 299 | 168.16 | 5665.00 |
| acceptable cost of the child's stay in a preschool institution Total | | 334 | 178.39 | 6243.50 |
| | Male | 35 | 166.23 | 49701.50 |
| | Female | 299 | | |
| | | 334 | | |

The Mann-Whitney U test did not reveal any significant differences in fathers' and mothers' attitudes about the possibility of enrolling their children in early learning programs. Fathers and mothers differ neither in terms of the reasons why their child did not previously attend a preschool institution ($U=3094$; $Z=-.939$; $p=.348$), nor in their attitudes about the type of early learning program in which they would enroll their child ($U=5035$; $Z=-.407$; $p=.684$). Fathers' and mothers' attitudes do not differ when it comes to the acceptable cost of the child's stay in a preschool institution ($U=4851.500$; $Z=-.803$; $p=.422$) (Table 6 and Table 7).

Table 7

Parents`S Gender and Attitudes Towards the Possibilities of Enrolling Children in Preschool Institutions and Early Learning Programs (Test Statistics)

| Variable | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|----------------|-----------|----------|-----------|
| Mann-Whitney U | 3094.000 | 5035.000 | 4851.500 |
| Wilcoxon W | 28972.000 | 5665.000 | 49701.500 |
| Z | -.939 | -.407 | -.803 |
| p | .348 | .684 | .422 |

1 - reason why the child has not previously attended a preschool institution; 2 - type of early learning program in which they would enroll their child; 3 - acceptable cost of the child's stay in a preschool institution

Table 8

Number of Children in the Family and Parents' Attitudes About the Possibilities of Enrolling Children in Preschool Institutions and Early Learning Programs (Ranks)

| Variable | Number of children in the family | N | Mean Rank |
|----------|----------------------------------|----|-----------|
| | One | 28 | 146.27 |

| | | | |
|--|-------|-----|--------|
| reason why the child has not previously attended a preschool institution | Two | 124 | 131.51 |
| | Three | 74 | 127.47 |
| | Four | 26 | 114.81 |
| | Five | 4 | 66.40 |
| | Total | 257 | |
| type of early learning program in which they would enroll their child | One | 40 | 142.98 |
| | Two | 164 | 168.26 |
| | Three | 93 | 167.86 |
| | Four | 30 | 188.17 |
| | Five | 6 | 173.50 |
| acceptable cost of the child's stay in a preschool institution | Total | 334 | |
| | One | 40 | 186.63 |
| | Two | 164 | 171.61 |
| | Three | 93 | 164.59 |
| | Four | 30 | 132.62 |
| | Five | 6 | 119.50 |
| | Total | 334 | |

Based on the median rank indicator, we conclude that parents with one child in the family are more willing to allocate a larger amount of money for their child's stay in a preschool institution, compared to parents from large families (Table 8). The highest median (Md=2.00) is found in the group of parents with one child in the family, compared to other groups of parents.

Table 9

Number of Children in the Family and Parents' Attitudes About the Possibilities of Enrolling Children in Preschool Institutions and Early Learning Programs (Test Statistics)

| Variable | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|----------|-------|-------|-------|
| χ^2 | 8.249 | 4.976 | 9.570 |
| df | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| p | .083 | .290 | .048 |

1 - reason why the child has not previously attended a preschool institution 2 - type of early learning program in which they would enroll their child 3 - acceptable cost of the child's stay in a preschool institution

The Kruskal-Volis test did not reveal a statistically significant difference in the attitudes of parents, given the different number of children in the family, when it comes to the reason why the child did not previously attend preschool ($\chi^2=8.249$; $df=4$; $p=.083$), as well as regarding the type of early learning program in which they would enroll their child ($\chi^2=4.976$; $df=4$; $p=.290$). The only statistically significant difference in the attitudes of parents with different numbers of children in the family was revealed when it comes to the acceptable cost of the child's stay in the institution ($\chi^2=9.570$; $df=4$; $p=.048$) (Table 9).

Table 10

Birth Order of Children in the Family and Parents' Attitudes Towards the Possibilities of Enrolling Children in Preschool Institutions and Early Learning Programs (Ranks)

| Variable | Birth order of the child in the family | N | Mean Rank |
|--|--|-----|-----------|
| reason why the child has not previously attended a preschool institution | First child | 102 | 137.67 |
| | Second child | 111 | 125.02 |
| | Third child | 28 | 120.63 |
| | Fourth child | 14 | 117.36 |
| | Fifth child | 2 | 106.25 |
| | Total | 257 | |
| type of early learning program in | | | |

| | | | |
|--|--------------|-----|--------|
| which they would enroll their child | First child | 143 | 149.13 |
| | Second child | 133 | 176.13 |
| | Third child | 39 | 188.81 |
| | Fourth child | 16 | 192.69 |
| | Fifth child | 3 | 249.50 |
| acceptable cost of the child's stay in a preschool institution | Total | 334 | |
| | First child | 143 | 179.52 |
| | Second child | 133 | 163.74 |
| | Third child | 39 | 156.00 |
| | Fourth child | 16 | 123.34 |
| | Fifth child | 3 | 146.17 |
| | Total | 334 | |

Judging by the mean values of the rank, we can conclude that parents whose fifth child attends a preparatory program did not think about his/her enrollment in preschool institutions and early learning programs at all. In this case, the group of parents who have one child had the lowest median (2.00), and parents who have more children in the family had a higher median.

Also, based on the mean values of the rank, we observe that parents whose first child attends a preparatory program are more willing to allocate a larger amount of money for his/her stay in a preschool institution compared to parents from large families (Table 10). The group of parents whose first child attends a preparatory program has the highest median result (Md=2.00), compared to other groups of parents.

Table 11

Birth Order of Children in the Family and Parents' Attitudes Towards the Possibilities of Enrolling Children in Preschool Institutions and Early Learning Programs (Test Statistics)

| Variable | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|----------|-------|--------|-------|
| χ^2 | 3.461 | 14.164 | 8.388 |
| df | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| p | .484 | .007 | .078 |

1 - reason why the child has not previously attended a preschool institution 2 - type of early learning program in which they would enroll their child 3 - acceptable cost of the child's stay in a preschool institution

Analysis of the results obtained by the Kruskal-Volis test shows that there is no statistically significant difference in the attitudes of parents regarding the order of birth of the child in the family when it comes to the reason why the child did not previously attend preschool ($\chi^2=3.461$; $df=4$; $p=.484$). However, the Kruskal-Volis test revealed that there is a statistically significant difference in the attitudes of parents regarding the type of early learning program in which they would enroll their child ($\chi^2=14.164$; $df=4$; $p=.007$) and when it comes to the acceptable cost of the child's stay in a preschool institution ($\chi^2=8.388$; $df=4$; $p=.078$) (Table 11).

Table 12

Family's Place of Residence and Parents' Attitudes Towards the Possibilities of Enrolling Children in Preschool Institutions and Early Learning Programs (Ranks)

| Variable | Place of living | N | Mean Rank |
|--|-----------------|-----|-----------|
| reason why the child has not previously attended a preschool institution | City | 46 | 146.98 |
| | Suburb | 60 | 144.23 |
| | Village | 151 | 117.47 |
| | Total | 257 | |
| type of early learning program in which they would enroll their child | City | 68 | 164.10 |
| | Suburb | 77 | 171.21 |
| | Village | 189 | 167.21 |
| | Total | 334 | |
| acceptable cost of the child's stay in a preschool institution | City | 68 | 182.43 |

| | | |
|---------|-----|--------|
| Suburb | 77 | 182.77 |
| Village | 189 | 155.91 |
| Total | 334 | |

Based on the mean rank indicator, we conclude that parents living in the city cited the following as the main reasons why their child has not attended preschool: the health condition of the child (weak immunity, frequent illnesses), lack of available places in preschools, and a bad experience with a previous child who attended preschool. According to the mean rank values, we can conclude that parents from urban areas are more willing to allocate a larger amount of money for their children's stay in a preschool institution (Table 12). This is confirmed by the higher median score of the group of parents living in the city (Md=2.00), compared to other groups of parents.

Table 13

Family's Place of Residence and Parents' Attitudes About the Possibilities of Enrolling Children in Preschool Institutions and Early Learning Programs (Test Statistics)

| Variable | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|----------|--------|------|-------|
| χ^2 | 11.803 | .248 | 8.138 |
| df | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| p | .003 | .883 | .017 |

1 - reason why the child has not previously attended a preschool institution 2 - type of early learning program in which they would enroll their child 3 - acceptable cost of the child's stay in a preschool institution

The data presented in Table 13 confirm that the Kruskal-Wallis test did not reveal a significant difference in parents' attitudes about the type of early learning program in which they would enroll their child ($\chi^2=.248$; $df=2$; $p=.883$), depending on the family's place of residence. At the same time, a statistically significant difference, considering the family's place of residence, was revealed in parents' attitudes about the reason why the child did not previously attend a preschool institution ($\chi^2=11.803$; $df=2$; $p=.003$), as well as in the attitudes about the acceptable cost of the child's stay in preschool ($\chi^2=8.138$; $df=2$; $p=.017$).

Table 14

Parents' Education Level and Attitudes Towards the Possibilities Of Enrolling Children in Preschool Institutions and Early Learning Programs (Ranks)

| Variable | Parents' educational level | N | Mean Rank |
|--|----------------------------|-----|-----------|
| reason why the child has not previously attended a preschool institution | Elementary school | 19 | 116.97 |
| | High school | 170 | 124.99 |
| | College | 13 | 162.38 |
| | University | 48 | 134.47 |
| | Master's degree | 7 | 159.50 |
| | Doctoral degree | 0 | |
| | Total | 257 | |
| type of early learning program in which they would enroll their child | Elementary school | 22 | 166.30 |
| | High school | 218 | 166.55 |
| | College | 15 | 178.80 |
| | University | 69 | 163.14 |
| | Master's degree | 9 | 199.00 |
| | Doctoral degree | 1 | 249.50 |
| | Total | 334 | |
| acceptable cost of the child's stay in a preschool institution | Elementary school | 22 | 118.55 |
| | High school | 218 | 162.68 |
| | College | 15 | 177.47 |
| | University | 69 | 188.75 |

| | | |
|-----------------|-----|--------|
| Master`s degree | 9 | 215.22 |
| Doctoral degree | 1 | 249.50 |
| Total | 334 | |

Based on the mean values of the ranks, we can conclude that parents with higher education are willing to allocate more funds for their child's stay in a preschool institution compared to parents with lower education levels (Table 14). This is confirmed by the results of the median of the four groups of parents whose completed education levels are higher education, college, Master`s and Doctoral degrees, which is (Md=2.00), compared to the median of the groups of parents whose completed education levels are elementary and high school, whose median result is (Md=1.00).

Table 15

Parents' Education Level and Attitudes Towards the Possibilities of Enrolling Children in Preschool Institutions and Early Learning Programs (Test Statistics)

| Variable | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|----------|-------|-------|--------|
| χ^2 | 6.747 | 2.548 | 16.394 |
| df | 4 | 5 | 5 |
| p | .150 | .769 | .006 |

1 - reason why the child has not previously attended a preschool institution 2 - type of early learning program in which they would enroll their child 3 - acceptable cost of the child's stay in a preschool institution

The data presented in Table 15 show that parents with different levels of education do not differ significantly when it comes to their attitudes about the reason why their child did not previously attend preschool ($\chi^2=6.747$; $df=4$ and $p=.150$), as well as on the type of early learning program in which they would enroll their child ($\chi^2=2.548$; $df=5$ and $p=.769$). The Kruskal-Wallis test revealed a statistically significant difference among parents with different educational levels in their attitudes about the acceptable cost of their children's stay in a preschool institution.

4. Discussion

The first hypothesis from which we started the research was partially accepted, as it was found that sociodemographic characteristics such as the number of children in the family, the birth order of the child, the place of residence of the family, and the level of education of the parents are statistically significant determinants of parents` attitudes about the possibilities of enrolling children in preschool institutions and early learning programs. It was found that parents who have one child in the family are more willing to allocate a larger amount of money for their child's stay in a preschool institution compared to parents who have more children. The results of a similar study (Lalduhzuali et al., 2022) showed that the largest percentage of parents (97%) have an average attitude towards preschool education, while only 3% of parents have a more favorable attitude, but significant differences in parents' attitudes regarding the number of children in the family have not been established. There are results showing that the largest percentage of parents have an "average" attitude towards preschool education, while only 13% of parents have a "more favorable" attitude (Parveen, 2024). Our research did not identify significant differences in parents' attitudes regarding the possibilities of enrollment in preschool institutions with regard to gender, which was also confirmed by the results of the research by other authors (Lalduhzuali et al., 2022; Parveen, 2024).

The variable birth order of the child in the family proved to be significant when it comes to parents' attitudes about the type of early learning program in which they would enroll their child, as well as the acceptable cost of the child's stay in a preschool institution, which was also our initial expectation. A study conducted in Hong Kong also found that the birth order of a child in the family, among other variables, significantly influences parents' choices when enrolling their children in early learning programs (Song, 2024).

A particularly indicative result in the research, pointed out by parents whose family's place of residence is the city, is that the priority reasons why their children did not attend preschool before enrolling in the preparatory program in the year before entering school are related to the child's health condition, lack of available places in preschool institutions, and a bad experience with a previous child who attended preschool institutions. In addition, parents from urban areas indicated that they were more willing to allocate a larger amount of money for their children's stay in a preschool institution. Other related research has found that the attitudes of parents from rural and urban areas regarding preschool education do not differ significantly (Barwal, 2018).

Although the research included the fewest parents with the highest level of education (master's and doctoral degrees, followed by parents with a college or university degree), they expressed a greater willingness to spend

more money on their child's preschool compared to parents with a lower level of education (elementary or high school). That the level of parents' education is a variable that significantly influences their attitudes towards preschool upbringing and education has been confirmed in other relevant studies (Wiegerová & Gavora, 2018; Lalduhzuali et al., 2022).

Limitations and future research

Respecting the principles of scientific correctness, it is necessary to point out certain limitations of this study. They primarily relate to the representation of fathers in the research, given that in traditional families, mothers are still more involved in the education of children and therefore more willing to participate in research on children's education, which was also the case in our research. The concept of modern, responsible parenting implies that both parents are equally involved in the education of a child. Future research directions may be directed at examining the effectiveness of the proposed measures to improve the situation in the field of preschool education in the Republic of Srpska. These measures were developed based on a survey of parents' attitudes about the possibilities of enrolling children in preschool institutions and early learning programs.

5. Conclusions

Based on the conducted study, we can draw several conclusions:

- starting from the dominant reasons why the parents in the sample surveyed did not enroll their children in preschool institutions and the data that the largest number of children from villages did not attend preschool institutions before enrolling in the preparatory program in the year before entering school, one of the possible directions of the given situation is the establishment and development of a network of preschool institutions in rural areas of the Republic of Srpska as a priority of the educational authorities so that preschool institutions would be proportionally represented in all environments. This can also be achieved by expanding existing capacities but also by establishing new preschool institutions that would be at the service of their users—children and their families;

- given that a significant number of respondents considered the issue of enrolling their preschool children in shorter early learning programs (half-day stay lasting up to 6 hours per day) and then suggested the cost of stay that they would be willing to allocate for their child's stay in a preschool institution, it is necessary to consider the possibility of introducing a half-day preschool education model, especially in those environments where there are no early learning programs at all. Choosing a shorter-duration early learning program model, parents also suggested an acceptable cost of stay for children that would not exceed 100 convertible marks (50 Euros) he direct implication for educational policymakers, but also practitioners, is to calculate the economic viability of introducing the aforementioned model, and in the case that the proposed price does not cover the economic cost of children's stay in a preschool institution, ParentPay could represent only one source of funding, while the state/local community would provide the other part of the funds from alternative financing methods;

- starting from the knowledge that parents who have a smaller number of children in the family (one) are more willing to allocate a larger amount for their child's stay in a preschool institution, it is necessary to consider models of assistance to large families, especially parents who have never thought about enrolling children in preschool institutions. It is necessary to consider the possibility of obtaining discounts for children's stays or a model of free attendance of preschool institutions for the third, fourth, and each subsequent child in the family;

- starting from the main reasons why parents in urban areas did not include children in preschool institutions and early learning programs, we note the need to reduce the number of children in preschool groups in urban areas. These groups often deviate from the norms regarding the recommended number of children, where the larger number of children in the group increases the possibility of spreading infectious/childhood diseases. In contrast, in smaller preschool groups where the recommended norms and the recommended number of children are respected, it would be beneficial to improve their health and acquire immunity. In addition, in cities there is an evident need to expand the existing capacities of preschool institutions, and this, judging by the views of parents, would be accompanied by their willingness to allocate a larger amount of money for the inclusion of children in preschool institutions.

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